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Chapter Title: Material Prayers and Maternity in Early Modern Italy: Signed, Sealed, Delivered

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Book Title: Domestic Devotions in Early Modern Italy

Book Editor(s): Maya Corry, Marco Faini and Alessia Meneghin

Published by: Brill

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctvbqs499.17

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CHAPTER 10

Material Prayers and Maternity in Early Modern Italy: Signed, Sealed, Delivered

Katherine M. Tycz

> Fu in Siena, al tempo che reggeva l'officio de' Nove, una gentil giovane di pochi anni andata a marito, e quelli figliuoli che facea, facea con grandissima pena e fatica; e al presente era gravida di sette mesi; e come paurosa, ognora cercava di leggende di santa Margherita, e di medicine e di brievi, e d'ogni altra cosa che credesse che li giovasse alla sua passione.[1,*]

Novella 217 of Franco Sacchetti's *Il Trecentonovelle* begins with a young married woman, seven months pregnant, who had undergone much pain and frustration to have her previous children. Afraid for her own well-being, as well as that of her unborn child during the pregnancy and birth, she seeks out 'legends of Saint Margaret, medicines, *brevi*, and every other thing'.[2] In other words, all the usual items available to a pregnant woman to allay her fears and pain. How might the resources used by the young woman in Sacchetti's story illuminate actual practices and objects in early modern Italy, thus allowing us to better understand women's lives?

1 'There was in Siena, when the Officio de' Nove governed, a polite young woman who had been married only a few years, and the children she had, she had had with the greatest pain and exertion; and at that moment, she was seven months pregnant; and as she was afraid, she continually sought out legends of the life of Saint Margaret, and medicines, and *brievi*, and every other thing that she believed would help her through her suffering': Sacchetti Franco, "Novella CCXVII" in *Il Trecentonovelle*, ed. E. Faccioli (Turin: 1970) 666.

* The research leading to these results has received funding from the European Research Council under the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007–2013) / ERC grant agreement n° 319475 for the project hosted by the University of Cambridge, *Domestic Devotions: The Place of Piety in the Renaissance Italian Home, 1400–1600* (Principal Investigators: Abigail Brundin, Deborah Howard, and Mary Laven). I would like to offer my gratitude to Abigail Brundin, Irene Galandra Cooper, and Sophie Pitman for their thoughtful comments on earlier versions of this essay and to the editors for their helpful suggestions.

2 *Brevi*, the more common spelling, will be used throughout this chapter.

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It is important to acknowledge the roots of Sacchetti's protagonist's fear regarding her impending labour. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber and David Herlihy have demonstrated high mortality rates among pregnant women in early fifteenth-century Florence, where at least a fifth of deaths in the demographic of women of childbearing years were attributed to complications related to pregnancy or childbirth. They propose that this percentage may have been higher due to incomplete records, especially for the poorest.[3] While Florence cannot be viewed as completely representative of the situation across Italy, it offers a glimpse of this perilous time in women's lives. Many women also wrote wills during their pregnancies in the event that they did not survive.[4] Depending upon their social status, women might be concerned with producing heirs in a timely manner, safely delivering a healthy child, or ensuring that the addition of children did not burden the family's financial situation.[5] The number of children relinquished to various orphanages, such as the Ospedale degli Innocenti in Florence, further illustrates how families might be unable to care for a child, sometimes after the death of a mother.[6] Infancy was also a precarious time as babies were susceptible to disease and malnutrition leading to high infant mortality rates.[7]

Scholars such as Jacqueline Musacchio have studied how the need to replenish the population in post-plague Italy spurred the production of objects associated with pregnancy from the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries. Referred to

3 Klapisch-Zuber C. – Herlihy D., *Tuscans and Their Families: A Study of the Florentine Catasto of 1427* (New Haven – London: 1978) 276–277.

4 Chojnacki's study of Venetian wills indicates that pregnant women wrote wills between 1331 and 1450 with increasing regularity: Chojnacki S., "Dowries and Kinsmen in Early Renaissance Venice", *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 5, 4: The History of the Family, II (1975) 571–600, 584–585.

5 On the use of objects to assist with conception: Musacchio J.M., *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy* (New Haven – London: 1999) 125–141. On early modern Catholic attitudes to impotence, contraception, and abortion: Noonan J.T., *Contraception: A History of Its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists, Enlarged Edition* (Cambridge – London: 1986); Christopoulous J., "Abortion and the Confessional in Counter-Reformation Italy", *Renaissance Quarterly* 65 (2012) 443–484; Baernstein P.R. – Christopoulos J., "Interpreting the Body in Early Modern Italy: Pregnancy, Abortion and Adulthood", *Past and Present* 223 (2014) 41–75.

6 Other children might be given up if they were born to single mothers: Gavitt P., *Charity and Children in Renaissance Florence: The Ospedale degli Innocenti, 1410–1536* (Ann Arbor, MI: 1990) 187–272; Sandri L., "Fuori e dentro l'ospedale. Bambini nel Quattrocento" in Ulivieri S. (ed.), *Le bambine nella storia dell'educazione* (Rome – Bari: 1999) 75–109, 75–93.

7 On infant mortality rates in Florence: Klapisch-Zuber C., "Blood Parents and Milk Parents: Wet Nursing in Florence, 1300–1530", in Klapisch-Zuber C. (ed.), *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Tuscany*, trans. L. Cochrane (Chicago – London: 1985) 132–164, 148–153.

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as 'maternal mediators' by Musacchio, these objects were meant to encourage mothers to focus on the acquisition of meaningful material possessions rather than the fear of childbirth.[8] The material culture of childbirth and maternity, particularly in upper-class households, revolved around items such as *deschi da parto* [birth trays], special maiolica *impagliata* [accouchement] sets, and luxurious textiles for mother and child, which were usually procured by anxious husbands and proud fathers or were presented as gifts by friends, family, and neighbours.[9] Like the expectant mother in Sacchetti's story, women across the social spectrum exercised their own agency by acquiring both spiritual and medicinal aids, such as the 'legends of Saint Margaret, medicines, *brevi*, and every other thing', to comfort and protect themselves and their unborn children.

Religious protection offered the most socially acceptable route for women to confront their fears. By concentrating on the material qualities and powerful holy words inscribed on devotional pregnancy aids, this essay will analyse the 'legends of Saint Margaret', the '*brevi*', and will offer suggestions regarding 'every other thing' Sacchetti's protagonist might have used. Investigating the devotional tools women employed at the moment of their initiation into motherhood illuminates how practices and objects associated with pregnancy and maternity were ascribed efficacy by medieval and early modern Italian women.

1 Pregnancy

1.1 *Legends of Saint Margaret*

Explicitly mentioned in Sacchetti's account, Saint Margaret of Antioch, the patron saint of childbirth, was a likely focus for supplicatory prayer. The legend of Margaret's escape from the belly of the dragon, interpreted as a metaphor for safe childbirth, illustrated how faith during pregnancy could help women survive the perilous ordeal. Records demonstrate that women called upon Margaret's intercession in public spaces, but very little is known about related devotional practices carried out in the domestic realm.[10] Some extant sources

8 Musacchio, *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth* 125–147.

9 Ibid., 36–51.

10 Gilbertson L., "Imaging St. Margaret: *Imitatio Christi* and *Imitatio Mariae* in the Vanni Altarpiece", in Cornelison S.J. – Montgomery S.B. (eds.), *Images, Relics, and Devotional Practices in Medieval and Renaissance Italy*, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 296 (Tempe, AZ: 2006) 115–138, 115.

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and objects demonstrate how devotees prayed for Margaret's assistance with pregnancy and childbirth.

In 1481, Antonio Guarino, a professor of medicine in Pavia, promoted reading the story of Margaret's life aloud during labour in his *Tractatus de matricibus*.[11] The story of Margaret's life as preserved in the *Legenda aurea* by Jacobus de Voragine circulated in books of hours and manuscript miscellanies over the centuries. Eventually, versions of Margaret's legend and prayers dedicated to the saint were disseminated in printed form. Many of these versions overtly announced the importance and uses of Margaret's hagiography in their titles by explaining that the legend itself offered spiritual and physical protection. An illustrated printed booklet entitled *La Legenda devotissima de santa Margarita vergine et martire* continued with the note that it was *vtilissima per le donne parturiente*.[12] Others contained more explicit instructions, such as the *Legenda et oratione di Santa Margherita vergine, & martire historiata; laqual oratione legendola, ouer ponendola adosso a vna donna, che non potesse parturire, subito parturirà senza pericolo* [Fig. 10.1]. This *Legenda et oratione* contains both the complete story of Margaret's martyrdom recounted in rhyming verse as well as prayers in both Latin and the vernacular. The title proclaims its ability to aid a woman who is struggling to give birth 'senza pericolo (without danger)'. To unlock its power the woman should read the prayer or place the text on her body. The practice of applying holy texts, particularly prayers and legends of Margaret, in the form of manuscript codices and rolls, to a woman's body during labour was a popular practice across Europe.[13] While differing levels of literacy may have prevented Italian women from consuming the burgeoning scholarship on women's medicine, the literal application of the holy words

11 Musacchio, *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth* 142.

12 'Very useful for women in labour': *La Legenda devotissima de santa Margarita vergine et martire vtilissima per le donne parturiente* (Milan, Jo. Antonio da Burgho: 25 January 1536) Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, no shelfmark.

13 Draped over or wrapped around the woman's body, manuscript rolls bear affinities to the girdles discussed later. Amulet rolls are sometimes described as 'girdles' by scholars: Volf S.L., *A "Medicyne of Wordes": Women, Prayer, and Healing in Fourteenth – and Fifteenth-Century England*, Ph.D. dissertation (Arizona State University: 2008) 261–268; Jones P.M. – Olsan L.T., "Performative Rituals for Conception and Childbirth in England, 900–1500", *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 89, 3 (2015) 406–433; Skemer D.C., *Binding Words: Textual Amulets in the Middle Ages* (University Park, PA: 2006) 240–250; Carolus-Barré L., "Un nouveau parchemin amulette et la légende de sainte Marguerite patronne des femmes en couches", *Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* 123, 2 (1979) 256–275.

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associated with Margaret to their bodies offered women the opportunity to exert control over their health.[14]

Before her martyrdom by beheading is described in the *Legenda et oratione*, Margaret's final words are recorded in a prayer. Margaret announces that those who say her prayer with contrition be forgiven for their sins. She proclaims that keeping the written prayer in the home will protect from illness, as the prophylactic powers of the words associated with the Saint are activated by their physical presence alone. Finally, Margaret asks that pregnant women be accompanied safely through their labour by wearing her prayer. Both the recitation of the holy words of Margaret's prayer and interaction with their material expression unlocked her intercessory power. After the story of Margaret's death, a rubric contained within the prayer addresses the husband of the pregnant woman saying: 'se nel parto tua donna è in periglio, meglior medico qui, non te consiglio'.[15]

With the increased circulation of prayers facilitated by the invention of print, some vernacular texts of Margaret's legend inevitably aroused suspicion from the Tridentine Church. Among those banned in 1604, 'per contenere esse respettivamente cose false, superstitiose, apocrife e lascive', was another prayer to Margaret, the *Oratione di S. Margarita in ottava rima, per le donne di parto: O dolce madre*.[16] In this era of reform, Church authorities prohibited prayers with rubrics offering specific protection or assistance, such as those for 'le donne di parto (pregnant women)', explaining that they detracted from pure devotion

14 Most women who owned medical books through the early sixteenth century were of noble or bourgeois status: Green M.H., "The Possibilities of Literacy and the Limits of Reading: Women and the Gendering of Medical Literacy", in Green M.H. (ed.), *Woman's Healthcare in the Medieval West* (Aldershot: 2000) 1–76, 9–18.

15 'If during childbirth your lady is in danger, a better medic than this, I cannot suggest to you': *Legenda et oratione di Santa Margherita vergine, & martire historiata; laqual oratione legendola, ouer ponendola adosso a vna donna, che non potesse parturire, subito parturirà senza pericolo* (Venice, Francesco de Tomaso di Salò e compagni: 1550) fol. 21r.

16 'Because they contained false, superstitious, apocryphal, and lascivious things': "Parte terza. Avertimenti in materia de libri prohibiti e sospesi etc", in *Sommaria instruttione del M.R.P. Maestro Fr. Archangelo Calbetti da Recanati dell'ordine de' Predicatori Inquisitor generale di Modona, Carpi, Nonantola e loro diocesi, e della Provincia di Garfagnana A' suoi RR. Vicari nella Inquisition sodetta intorno alla maniera di trattar alla giornata i negotii del Sant'Ufficio per quello che a loro s'appartiene* (Modena, Gio. Maria Verdi: 1604) in *Scriniolum sanctae Inquisitionis Astensis in quo quaecumque ad id muneris obeundum spectare visa sunt videlicet librorum prohibitorum indices* [...] (Asti, Virgilium de Zangrandis: 1610) 342. Many thanks to Marco Faini for transcribing and sharing the content of this list. For a discussion of this list of prohibited books: Caravale G., *Forbidden Prayer: Church Censorship and Devotional Literature in Renaissance Italy*, trans. P. Dawson (Farnham – Burlington, VT: 2011) 191–192.

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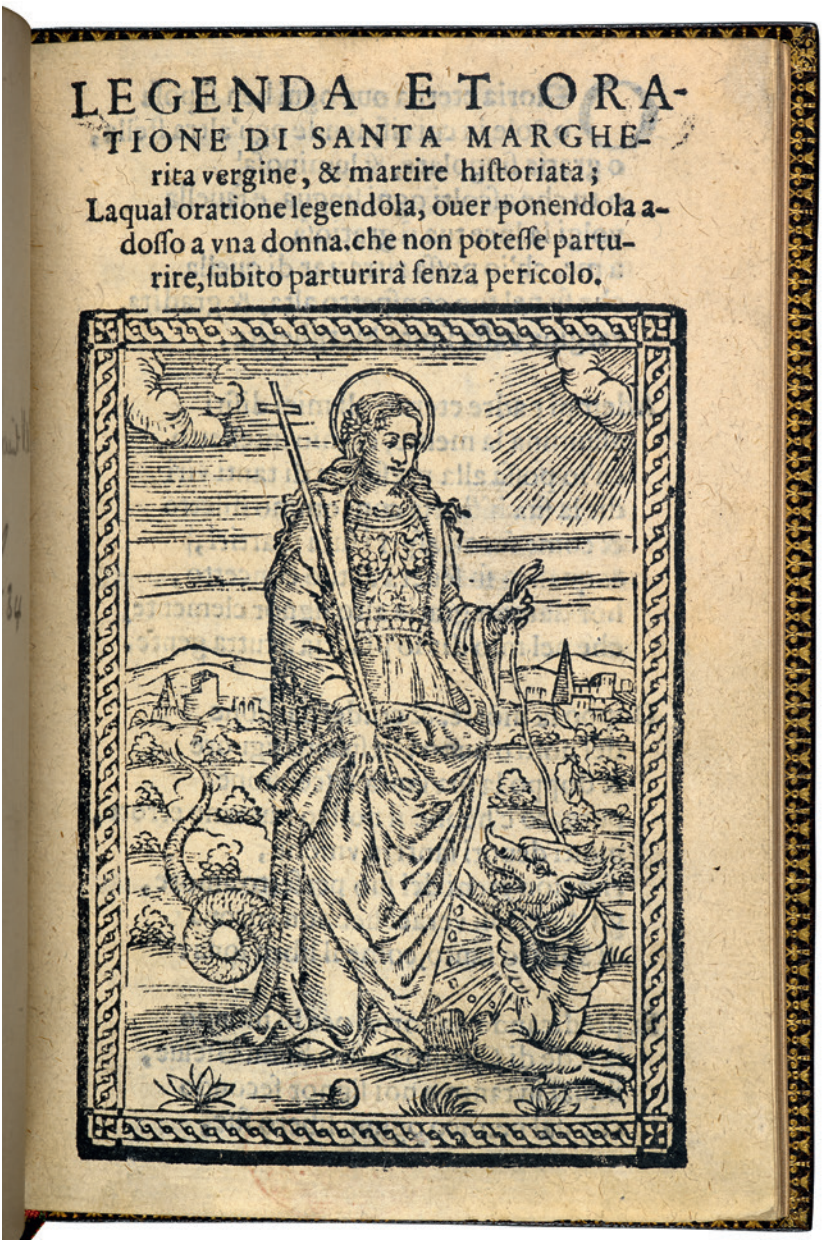
LEGENDA ET ORA-
TIONE DI SANTA MARGHE-
rita vergine, & martire hiſtoriata;
Laqual oratione legendola, ouer ponendola a-
doſſo a vna donna.che non poteſſe partu-
rire,ſubito parturirà ſenza pericolo.

FIGURE 10.1 Title page of the *Legenda et oratione di Santa Margherita vergine, & martire historiata; laqual oratione legendola, ouer ponendola adosso a vna donna, che non potesse parturire, subito parturirà senza pericolo*, (Venice, Francesco de Tomaso di Salò e compagni: 1550). Woodcut and print on paper, octavo. London, The British Library, General Reference Collection C.38.b.34., not paginated.
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to saints and their supplicatory abilities, concentrating instead upon 'a merely mechanical and material value'.[17]

1.2 *Brevi*

Unlike the 'legends of Saint Margaret, medicines […] and every other thing', which are only mentioned at the beginning of Sacchetti's novella, the story revolves around the woman's attempt to acquire a pregnancy *breve*, a more mysterious aid. Apotropaic and protective objects called *brevi*, or more specifically *brevi da portare addosso* (*brevi* to wear),[18] took their name from brief texts sealed within a container. The paper or parchment *breve* would be folded and sealed or sewn shut, a requirement that maintained the efficacy of the text. It would then be placed in a pouch and worn on the body, usually around the neck. The texts were often composed of prayers, biblical phrases, and holy names interspersed with symbols such as crosses.[19] Sometimes *brevi* contained other objects in addition to or in place of the prayer sheets – from substances that might have been considered relics to other more 'superstitious' materials, like magnets.[20] While amulets of a textual nature, such as *brevi*, had long been employed by both men and women across Europe, those used by Renaissance Italians have been misunderstood, relegated to the realm of magic and superstition by both contemporary ecclesiastical figures and modern scholars.[21] This chapter argues that *brevi* should be considered alongside the devotional

17 Caravale, *Forbidden Prayer* 192.

18 These are sometimes called *brevi da portare al collo* (*brevi* to wear around the neck).

19 Cardini F., "Il 'breve' (secoli XIV–XV): tipologia e funzione", *La Ricerca Folklorica* 5: La scrittura: funzioni e ideologie (1982) 63–73, 63; Cardona G.R., "Gli amuleti scritti: un excursus comparativo", *La Ricerca Folklorica* 8: La medicina popolare in Italia (1983) 91–97, 92; Skemer, *Binding Words* 13–19.

20 Because *brevi* were sealed, it was often difficult to know their contents. While the term referred to a textual amulet, it might be used to describe a pouch that contained a written text and/or another type of protective device. On the developing definitions of superstition according to the Church: O'Neil M., *Discerning Superstition: Popular Errors and Orthodox Response in Late Sixteenth-Century Italy*, Ph.D. dissertation (Stanford University: 1982) 10–22; On superstitions regarding magnets and religious blessings: O'Neil M., "Magical Healing, Love Magic and the Inquisition in Late Sixteenth-century Modena", in Haliczer S. (ed.), *Inquisition and Society in Early Modern Europe* (London: 1987) 88–114, 102–103.

21 Many modern scholars rely largely on the categorisations of contemporary theologians in their understanding of these *brevi* as 'magical' and 'superstitious'. For example: Montesano M., *"Supra acqua et supra ad vento". "Superstizioni", maleficia e incantamenta nei predicatori francescani osservanti* (*Italia, sec. XV*), Nuovi Studi Storici 46 (Rome: 1999) 80–87.

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apotropaic objects – both sanctioned and unsanctioned – that devotees relied upon for comfort, aid, and divine intercession.[22]

In Sacchetti's novella, a maid in the pregnant woman's house meets a man who convinces her that two hermit friars 'sapeano fare un brieve che, tenendolo la donna addosso, non serebbe sí duro parto, che sanza pena non partorisse'.[23] The woman, desperate to escape the pain of childbirth, sends her young maid with five florins to fetch her this *breve*. However, the man '[…] là fece una cedola scritta, e piegatala, la legò tra piú zendadi, e cucilla in diverse maniere', forging the *breve* himself and keeping the money, rather than commissioning holy friars for their spiritual aid.[24] Finally, the man fabricates a story about the great effort required to acquire the *breve* and instructs the maid to tell the woman not to read it or unseal it to preserve the efficacy of the text. The pregnant woman keeps this promise for years after successfully giving birth. She even shares the object with her pregnant friends as it acquires the reputation of a legendary miracle-working amulet in Siena. However, the woman's curiosity eventually overwhelms her so 'se ne andò un dí con una compagna che sapea legere in una camera dinanzi alla tavola di Nostra Donna, e con grandissima reverenza cominciorono a scucire il detto brieve; e trovata la scrittura in carta sottilissima di cavretto, lessono di detto brieve', which contained a nonsensical poem about a bad chicken, wine and bread.[25]

In Sacchetti's story the woman is fooled by blindly trusting the alleged holy friars and the unknown textual contents of the *breve*. Only after breaking the seal, and with the help of the image of the Madonna (a more mainstream

22 For discussions of scholars' efforts to move away from dichotomies of religion vs. magic/superstition, see Davis N.Z., "Some Tasks and Themes in the Study of Popular Religion", in Trinkaus C. – Oberman H.A. (eds.), *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion* (Leiden: 1974) 306–336, 307; Reinburg V., *French Books of Hours: Making an Archive of Prayer, c. 1400–1600* (Cambridge: 2012) 134; and Decker J.R., "'Practical Devotion': Apotropaism and the Protection of the Soul", in Brusati C. – Enenkel K.A.E. – Melion W.S. (eds.), *The Authority of the Word. Reflecting on Image and Text in Northern Europe, 1400–1700*, Intersections 20 (Leiden – Boston: 2012) 357–383, 360–361.

23 'Knew how to make a *brieve*, that if the woman wore it on her body, it would not be a difficult birth and that she would give birth without pain': Sacchetti, *Il Trecentonovelle* 666.

24 He 'made her a written card, and folded it, then sealed it in a pouch of thin cloth and sewed it in many different ways': Sacchetti, *Il Trecentonovelle* 667. Also see Cardini, "Il 'breve'" 69.

25 'She went with a literate friend into a room, in the presence of an image of Our Lady, and with the greatest reverence they began to remove the stitches from the sealed *brieve*; having found the writing on the thinnest and most delicate goat-skin parchment, they read this *brieve*'. The poem read: '*Gallina gallinaccia, /Un orciuolo di vino e una cofaccia, /Per la mia gola caccia, /S'ella il può fare, si 'l faccia, / E se non sì, si giaccia*': Sacchetti, *Il Trecentonovelle* 667–668.

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means of intercession) and her literate friend, she discovers the meaningless poem inside the *breve*. While Sacchetti's criticism of the practice as a learned man is evident, his parody reflects his desire to distinguish himself from the uneducated masses, particularly uneducated women, and from the commonly-held belief in the power of the *breve*. Like the *Legenda et oratione di Santa Margherita vergine* [Fig. 10.1], which touted its ability to serve as the 'meglior medico' during difficult labour, the woman's confidence in the charlatan's alleged connection to 'holy friars' in Sacchetti's story reflects the willingness of early modern Italians to entrust their health to popular healers rather than traditional cures offered by trained professionals.[26]

Religious figures, such as the fifteenth-century preacher Bernardino of Siena, denounced the use of *brevi* explaining that their secretive nature made them superstitious and malicious, saying: 'Ingiustizia è chi à brevi; segni d'ingiustizia è chi dice: "Non aprire quello breve, che perderà la virtù se tu l'apri". Quando persona ti dice che tu no' l'apra, nol tenere, e aprelo, e mira a questi segni'.[27] Despite criticism of these *brevi* expressed by contemporary theologians and satirical writers like Sacchetti, it is evident that many people consumed these objects in great quantities. While *brevi* seem to have been ubiquitous in late medieval and early modern Italy, the number of known extant examples is low.[28]

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26 On people's reliance on popular medicine (including charlatans and female healers) over traditional medicine (university-trained doctors): Gambaccini P., *Mountebanks and Medicasters: A History of Italian Charlatans* (Jefferson, NC – London: 2004) 83–97; Gentilcore D., *Healers and Healing in Early Modern Italy* (Manchester – New York: 1998) 21–25; Gentilcore D., *Medical Charlatanism in Early Modern Italy* (Oxford: 2006) 261–264.

27 'It is wrong for one to have *brevi*; those who say: "Don't open that *breve*, because it will lose its virtue if you open it" show signs of wrongdoing. When a person tells you that you cannot open it, don't keep it, and open it, and pay attention to these signs': Bernardino of Siena, "Questa è la predica contra e maliardi e incantatori", *Le prediche volgari: Predicazione del 1425 in Siena*, ed. C. Cannarozzi, 5 vols. (Pistoia: 1958) vol. 2, 61–62.

28 Though these objects are difficult to uncover in archival and library catalogues since they are gathered into miscellaneous collections and family papers, they can occasionally be found attached to Inquisition records. Many examples have been found in Modenese records of the Sant'Uffizio: O'Neil M., "Discerning Superstition"; O'Neil M., "Magical Healing, Love Magic and the Inquisition" 88–114; O'Neil M., "*Sacerdote ovvero strione*: Ecclesiastical and Superstitious Remedies in Sixteenth-century Italy", in Kaplan S.L. (ed.), *Understanding Popular Culture: Europe from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century* (Berlin: 1984) 53–83; Fantini M.P., "La circolazione clandestina dell'Orazione di Santa Marta: un episodio modenese" in Zarri G. (ed.), *Donna, disciplina, creanza cristiana dal XV al XVII secolo: studi e testi a stampa* (Rome: 1996) 45–65; Roveri L., "Scritture magiche. Brevi, lettere di scongiuro, libri di *secreti* nei processi inquisitoriali emiliano-romagnoli del Cinquecento e Seicento", *Chronica Mundi* 1 (2011) 2–32. The author's thesis, *Material Prayers: The Use of Text in Early Modern Italian Domestic Devotions*, Ph.D. dissertation (University of Cambridge: 2017), analyses other examples found in libraries, archives, museums, and Inquisition records.

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FIGURE 10.2 "Lettera di rivelazione di Maria Ori [Letter of Revelation of Maria Ori]" found in the crypt of the Chiesa di San Paolo Apostolo, late sixteenth century. Ink on paper, seal wax, and woodcut encased in copper and glass. Roccapelago di Pievepelago, Museo delle Mummie di Roccapelago.
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Both the ephemerality of materials used and the fate of the object after the owner's demise may explain low survival rates. It is possible that many of these amuletic texts were buried with their owners: examples have been found in the limited number of burial sites from this era that have been excavated in Italy.

During a routine pre-restoration analysis begun in 2008 in the Chiesa della Conversione di San Paolo Apostolo, which overlooks the small village of Roccapelago di Pievepelago in the mountainous Apennine region between Bologna and Modena, a team of archaeologists discovered a cache of about 280 bodies in various states of natural mummification.[29] Unearthed along with the hoard of mummified remains in the long-forgotten crypt beneath the church floor was a worn sheet of paper covered in a handwritten prayer [Fig. 10.2].

29 Traversari M. – Milani V., "Quadri paleopatologici nelle fonti documentarie: il caso di Roccapelago e i suoi registri dei morti", *Pagani e cristiani: forme e attestazioni di religiosità del monto antica in Emilia* 11 (Florence: 2012) 171–178, 171; Gruppioni G., et al., "Gli scavi della Chiesa di San Paolo di Roccapelago nell'Appennino modenese. La cripta con i corpi mummificati naturalmente", *Pagani e cristiani: forme e attestazioni di religiosità del monto antica in Emilia* 10 (Florence: 2011) 219–245, 219.

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FIGURE 10.3 Reverse of Fig. 10.2, "Lettera di rivelazione di Maria Ori [Letter of Revelation of Maria Ori]"
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Now fragile and yellowed with age, this sheet of paper, referred to as a '*Lettera di rivelazione* (Letter of Revelation)' or a '*Lettera di componenda* (Letter of Agreement)' formed part of a devotional and protective ensemble, which may be considered a *breve*. The *Lettera* itself contains many prayers, including the 'Rivelazione (Revelation)' that Christ proclaimed to Saints Elizabeth, Bridget, and Matilda, a copy of which was allegedly discovered in the Holy Sepulchre [Fig. 10.3 *verso*].[30]

Folded four times into a small rectangle, the prayer sheet was sealed along with an image [Fig. 10.4]. The image, though now worn, is a woodcut depicting the Virgin Mary. To protect the paper devotional image, it was placed on a sheet of copper and ensconced behind a pane of glass. The image was subsequently attached to the folded *Lettera* with *cera lacca* (seal wax), remnants of

30 Versions survive from across medieval and early modern Europe: Labate D., "Documenti cartacei tra le mummie della cripta cimiteriale della chiesa di S. Paolo di Roccapelago-Pievepelago (MO)", *Quaderni Estensi* 4 (2012) <http://www.quaderniestensi.beniculturali.it/qe4/23_QE4_contributi_labate_labellarte.pdf> (accessed 15 June 2016) 259–265, 264–265.

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FIGURE 10.4 Detail of Fig. 10.2, Woodcut image of the Madonna and Child on a copper backing with a glass cover
© MUSEO DELLE MUMMIE DI ROCCAPELAGO

which survive.[31] The image offered its own form of security to both the owner and the prayer, shielding the *Lettera* sealed beneath from the more damaging elements. The act of sealing the sacred image to the *Lettera* served more than practical purposes; in the medieval and early modern world, the seal on a document represented truth and authenticity.[32] Attaching an image of the Mother of God to the prayer could offer verification and legitimacy of the object's sanctity in the mind of the owner.

The small size of the folded prayer sheet (measuring about 2.5 × 5 cm when folded) found in the crypt and the attached devotional image suggests that these objects were worn by one of the deceased, probably in a small pouch hung around the neck.[33] While the *breve*'s pouch for this *Lettera* does not survive, examples of similar devotional devices were found still attached to other mummified

31 Labellarte M.A., "Il restauro della lettera rivelazione di Maria Ori", *Quaderni Estensi* 4 (2012) <http://www.quaderniestensi.beniculturali.it/qe4/23_QE4_contributi_labate_labellarte.pdf > (accessed 22 May 2014) 266–68, 266.

32 Bedos-Rezak B.M., "In Search of a Semiotic Paradigm: The Matter of Sealing in Medieval Thought and Praxis (1050–1400)", in Adams N. – Cherry J. – Robinson J. (eds.), *Good Impressions: Image and Authority in Medieval Seals* (London: 2008) 1–7, 1.

33 The *Lettera* is written on a sheet of paper that appears to be about half a folio in size.

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FIGURE 10.5 *Breve* found in the crypt of the Chiesa di San Paolo Apostolo, late sixteenth-early seventeenth century. Pressed paper image and devotional medallion in a cloth pouch. Roccapelago di Pievepelago, Museo delle Mummie di Roccapelago.
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remains in Roccapelago [Fig. 10.5]. One plain cloth *breve* pouch, probably made of linen, contained a small, simple religious medallion and a piece of paper, and was suspended from the wearer's neck by a cord of the same textile.[34]

The *Lettera* cannot be specifically linked to any one corpse, but it offers clues to the life and identity of its wearer. The text ends with the words 'Maria Orii Rocca Pelago' – possibly the name of its owner – as well as a selection of prayers to protect her throughout her life.[35] Unfortunately, no evidence of Maria Orii (Ori) has been found in the limited surviving archival documents.[36]

34 Labate, "Documenti cartacei" 262–263.

35 While names of owners appear in the same manner on similar prayers, this may be a simple invocation to the Virgin Mary, with the prayer ending 'Maria, ori' an abbreviated version of 'Maria, ora pro nobis' or 'Mary, pray for us'. However, records indicate that a family by the name of Ori was living in the town of Pievepelago (of which Roccapelago is a hamlet) in the seventeenth century; in 1670, Bartolomeo Ori and Giovanni Stefano Ori, both from Pievepelago, were recorded in the records of the Inquisition in Modena: b. 161, ff. 11, 1670 in Prodi P. – Spaggiari A. – Trenti G. (eds.), *I processi del tribunale dell'inquisizione di Modena: inventario generale analitico: 1489–1874* (Modena: 2003) 158.

36 During a conversation with anthropologist Mirko Traversari on 19/6/2015, it was noted that a preliminary search of the town's archives by scholars working on the excavation did not locate anyone named Maria Ori in the death records. For published results of this archival research: Traversari M. – Milani V., "Quadri paleopatologici nelle fonti documentarie" 171–178.

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Although little is known about Maria Ori, this text offers up clues to her daily concerns. Carried with her to the grave, this precious but unassuming spiritual aide would also have accompanied Maria through her everyday life and provided protection and spiritual support at key moments in her life cycle.

Instructions embedded in the prayer direct the wearer to use it during childbirth. The rubric indicates: 'Portandola adosso la donna gravida partoriva', emphasizing that the potency of the prayer can be exerted through interaction with the material text – the pregnant woman only needs to wear it on her body during labour, like the prayer of Saint Margaret.[37] Further, the image of the Madonna attached to the prayer would have lent protection to pregnant women, who were encouraged to pray to the Mother of God.

The rubric to the prayer extends protection to Maria's home, explaining: 'senza pericolo nella casa dove sarà questa/Rivelazione non vi sarà illusione di cose cattive'.[38] Did this *lettera* serve its purpose for Maria so well that she decided to carry it with her into the afterlife, or did she die, possibly during childbirth, to be buried with all the garments she wore at the time? The presence of such a document in a scientifically excavated archaeological context provides authentication for practices associated with objects and texts that lack a provenance. The Roccapelago *Lettera* testifies to the continuing value of such objects in women's daily life, lasting well beyond the time of Sacchetti's story.

Through the medium of print, this type of material prayer became available to more members of society, since a literate acquaintance was no longer required to procure a *breve*. An early extant example of a printed protective prayer known as the *Misura di Christo* was also folded like the Roccapelago *lettera* to protect its contents and to facilitate wearing in a pouch [Fig. 10.6].[39] Printed in red ink, the *Misura di Christo* employs the popular devotional practice of meditating upon the Measure of Christ on the Cross, a representation of which is depicted in the lower right-hand corner.[40] The *Misura* also contains a specific verse for the protection of pregnant women, advising: 'una do[n]na ch[e] non potisse partorire metezela adosso con devotio[n]e dice[n]do uno pater

37 'Wearing this on her body the pregnant woman will give birth': "Lettera di rivelazione di Maria Ori [Letter of Revelation of Maria Ori]", Roccapelago di Pievepelago, Museo delle Mummie di Roccapelago.

38 'Carrying this on the body, the pregnant woman will give birth without harm, in the house where this *rivelazione?* is kept, there will not be worry of evil things': Ibid.

39 Skemer, *Binding Words* 229–230; Bühler C.F., "An Orazione della misura di Cristo", *La Bibliofilia* 39 (1938) 430–433.

40 Meditating upon the Measure of Christ on the Cross could also earn indulgences: Bynum C.W., *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York: 2011) 94–96.

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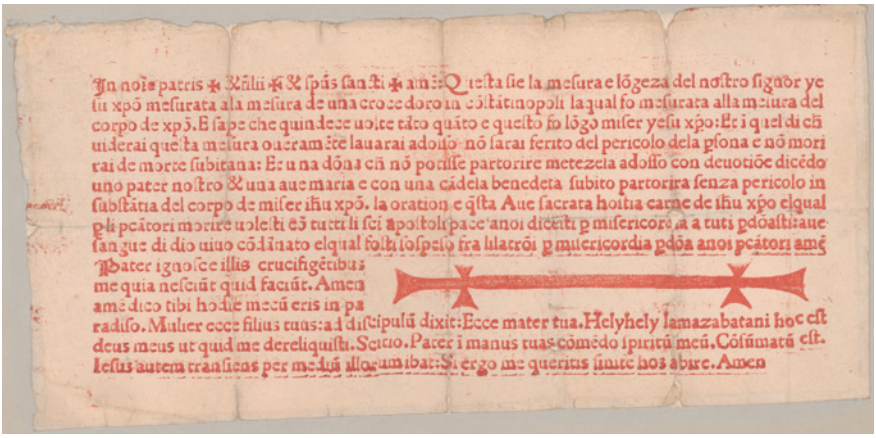
In nois patris ✠ &alli ✠ & spās sanctī ✠ am:
Questa sie la mesura e lōgeza del nostro signor ye
su xpō mesurata ala mesura de una croce doro in costātinopoli la qual fo mesurata alla mesura del
corpo de xpō. E sape che quin dece uolte tāto quāto e questo fo lōgo miser yesu xpo: E si quel di cī
uiderai questa mesura ouer amēte lauarai adosso nō sarai ferito del pericolo dela psona e nō mori
rai de morte subitana: E si una dōna cī nō potisse partorire metezela adosso con deuotiōe dicēdo
uno pater nostro & una aue maria e con una cādela benedeta subito partorira senza pericolo in
substātia del corpo de miser ihu xpō. la oration e qsta Aue sacrata hostia carne de ihu xpo elqual
pa peātori morire uolse ti eō tutti li sci apostoli pace'anoi diceti p misericordia a tuti pdōa ltitiaue
sanguis di dio uiuo cōsānato elqual fosti iosspso fra lilatrōi p misericordia pdōa anoi peātori amē
Pater ignosce illis crucifigētibus
me quia nesciūt quid faciūt. Amen
amē dico tibi hodie mecū eris in pa
radiso. Mulier ecce filius tuus: ad discipulū dixit: Ecce mater tua. Helyhely lamazabatani hoc est
deus meus ut quid me dereliquisti. Scitio. Pater i manus tuas cōmēdo ispiritū meū. Cōsūmatū est.
Iesus autem transiens per medū illorum ibat: Si ergo me queritis sinite hos abire. Amen

FIGURE 10.6 "Orazione della misura di Cristo [Prayer of the Measure of Christ]", Italy, unsigned: before 1500. Red ink on paper, 10.5 × 22 cm. New York, The Morgan Library and Museum, Checklist: ChL 1360, PML 16529.
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nostro & una ave maria e con una ca[n]dela benedeta subito partorira senza pericolo in substa[n]tia del corpo de miser ihu xpo'.[41] The physical presence of the printed prayer and the blessed candle would operate in concert with the recited Pater Noster and Ave Maria to aid the woman safely through childbirth.

Various printed prayers offered this same protective quality, which was enacted when the woman placed it on her flesh. Although viewed with suspicion by the Tridentine Church, prayers such as these continued to be printed throughout the early modern period. The frontispiece of another prayer sheet, called the *Oratione devotissima alla matre di Dio trovata nel S. Sepolcro di Christo*, alleges that it was first printed in Barcelona and then translated into Italian and reprinted in Venice [Fig. 10.7].[42] This prayer also offers aid to women who are struggling to give birth explaining: 'Se alcuna donna non potrà

41 'A woman that is struggling to give birth should wear it with devotion, say a Pater Noster and an Ave Maria with a blessed candle nearby, and she will quickly give birth without danger in the presence of the Body of the Lord Jesus Christ': "Orazione della misura di Cristo [Prayer of the Measure of Christ]" (Italy, unsigned: before 1500), New York, The Morgan Library and Museum, Checklist: ChL 1360, PML 16529.

42 "Oratione devotissima alla matre di Dio trovata nel S. Sepolcro di Christo [Most Devout Prayer to the Mother of God found in the Holy Sepulchre of Christ]" (In Barzellona, e ristampata in Venetia, co[n] licenza de' Superiori), Rome, Biblioteca Alessandrina, Miscellanea XIV D 27 8; Faini M., "Heterodox Devotion in the Italian Renaissance Home", in Corry M. – Howard D. – Laven M. (eds.), *Madonnas and Miracles: The Holy Home in Renaissance Italy*, exh. cat., The Fitzwilliam Museum (London: 2017) 166–169, 166.

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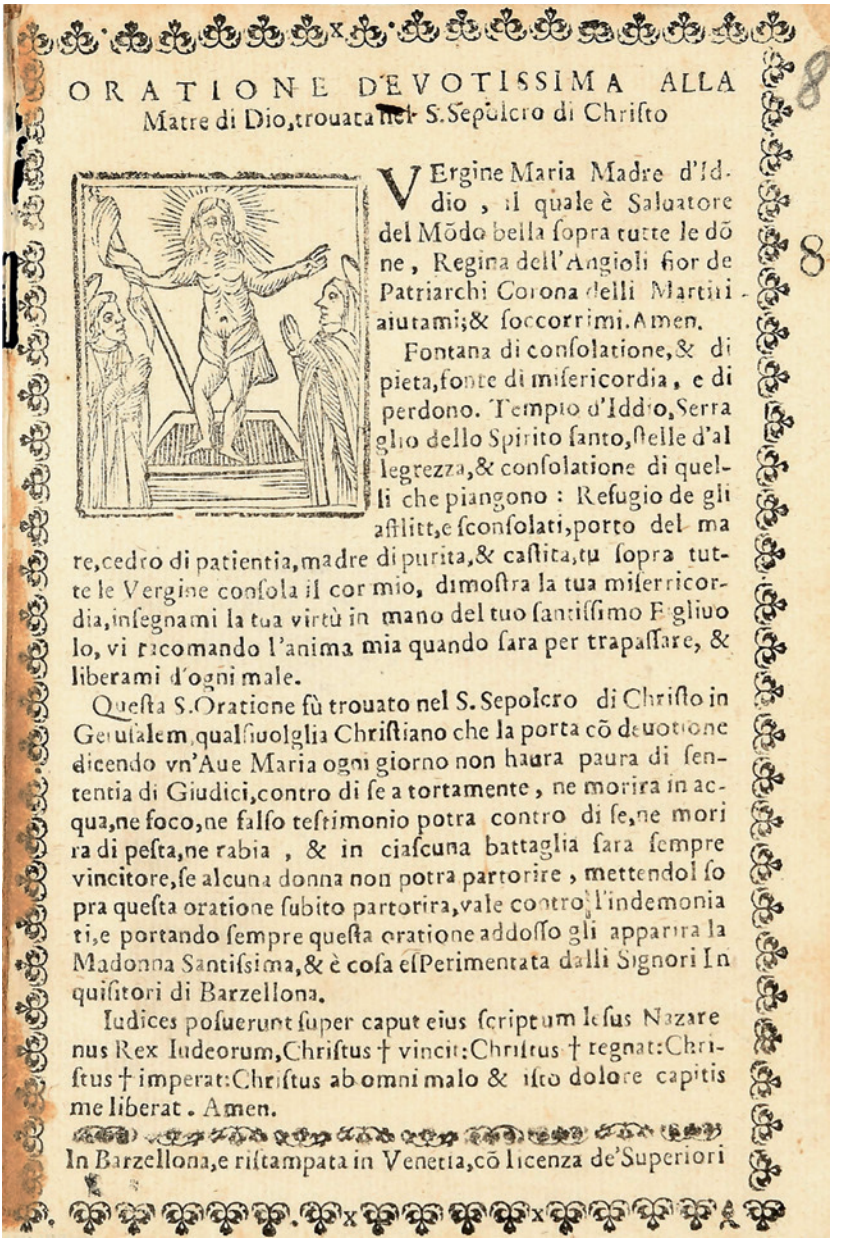

ORATIONE DEVOTISSIMA ALLA
Matre di Dio, trouata nel S. Sepolcro di Christo

VErgine Maria Madre d'Iddio, il quale è Saluatore del Mõdo bella sopra tutte le dõne, Regina dell'Angioli fior de Patriarchi Corona delli Martiri aiutami; & soccorrimi. Amen.

Fontana di consolatione, & di pieta, fonte di misericordia, e di perdono. Tempio d'Iddio, Serraglio dello Spirito santo, stelle d'allegrezza, & consolatione di quelli che piangono: Refugio de gli afflitt, e sconsolati, porto del mare, cedro di patientia, madre di purita, & castita, tu sopra tutte le Vergine consola il cor mio, dimostra la tua misericordia, insegnami la tua virtù in mano del tuo santissimo Figliuolo, vi racomando l'anima mia quando sara per trapassare, & liberami d'ogni male.

Questa S. Oratione fù trouato nel S. Sepolcro di Christo in Gerusalem, qualsiuolglia Christiano che la porta cõ deuotione dicendo vn'Aue Maria ogni giorno non haura paura di sententia di Giudici, contro di se a tortamente, ne morira in acqua, ne foco, ne falso testimonio potra contro di se, ne morira di pesta, ne rabia, & in ciascuna battaglia sara sempre vincitore, se alcuna donna non potra partorire, mettendol sopra questa oratione subito partorira, vale contro l'indemoniati, e portando sempre questa oratione addosso gli apparira la Madonna Santissima, & è cosa esPerimentata dalli Signori Inquisitori di Barzellona.

Iudices posuerunt super caput eius scriptum Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudeorum, Christus † vincit: Christus † regnat: Christus † imperat: Christus ab omni malo & isto dolore capitis me liberat. Amen.

In Barzellona, e ristampata in Venetia, cõ licenza de' Superiori

FIGURE 10.7 "Oratione devotissima alla matre di Dio trovata nel S. Sepolcro di Christo [Most Devout Prayer to the Mother of God found in the Holy Sepulchre of Christ]" (In Barzellona, e ristampata in Venetia, co[n] licenza de' Superiori). Ink on Paper, 175 × 120 mm. Rome, Biblioteca Alessandrina, Miscellanea XIV D 27 8.

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partorire, mettendol sopra questa oratione subito partorirà'.[43] As with the aforementioned *Misura di Christo* and the Roccapelago *Lettera di Rivelazione*, women are instructed to place the prayer on their bodies to aid them in a speedy labour. The *Oratione devotissima alla matre di Dio* is also a single-sheet prayer and could easily be carried on the body for daily protection or during childbirth. The practice of touching the prayer sheets to the body in an effort to induce labour operated in the same manner as the aforementioned legend of Saint Margaret or illustrated manuscript rolls used as birthing girdles in other parts of Europe.[44] Along the left edge of the *Oratione* reddish-brown stains tantalizingly resemble blood. While the stain could simply be remnants of rust from a metal clasp or glue, the active use of these ephemeral objects in childbirth may explain why few survive.[45]

The text of the *Oratione devotissima alla matre di Dio* is also accompanied by a woodcut image of Christ rising from the grave between the Virgin and a male saint, reiterating the link between image and text in Italian devotional practices. It also raises the question of literacy: was it important to be able to read the text? The image may have served as a marker identifying the text for the owner; reading the *oratione* may not have been as important as its protective presence.[46] These extant *brevi*, in the form of both manuscript and printed prayer sheets, attest to the enduring belief in the power of such aids during pregnancy and childbirth.

2 Every Other Thing

Many women employed 'ogni altra cosa' – other forms of spiritual assistance – in addition to legends of Margaret and *brevi*. Girdles employed by women to aide in conception, pregnancy, and childbirth are one example.[47] Married for

43 'If a woman cannot give birth, this prayer, placed upon her, will immediately set off her labour': English translation: Dawson in Caravale, *Forbidden Prayer* 193.

44 This practice may have also existed in Italy, though examples survive in greater number from England and France: Skemer, *Binding Words* 235–250.

45 Scientific analysis of the substance would be required to prove this theory, perhaps employing analytical methods and technology: Rudy K.M., "Dirty Books: Quantifying Patterns of Use in Medieval Manuscripts Using a Densitometer", *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art* 2, 1–2 (2010) 1–44.

46 On the apotropaic use of both religious and non-religious words and images on childbirth objects: Musacchio, *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth* 142.

47 Dilling W.J., "Girdles: Their Origin and Development, particularly with Regard to Their Use as Charms in Medicine, Marriage, and Midwifery", *Caledonian Medical Magazine* 9 (1912–1914) 337–357 and 403–425.

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nineteen years and still childless, Margherita Datini, the wife of the famous merchant from Prato, Francesco di Marco, desperately struggled to conceive a child. Margherita felt at fault for their lack of an heir, since Francesco had already fathered three illegitimate children.[48] Nearing the end of her childbearing years, Margherita sought advice from her sister, Francesca. Francesca's husband, Niccolò dell'Amannato Tecchini, relayed the advice in his letter to Francesco in 1395, the two men acting as the literate intermediaries between the sisters.

In the letter, Margherita's sister explained the details of a popular fertility treatment that utilized a girdle with an inscription to invoke the power of God. After instructing Margherita to first place the belt on a virgin boy, she told her: 'dicha prima 3 paternostri et 3 ave marie a onore di Dio et della Santa Trinita o di Santa Caterina et ch[e] elle le lettere che sono scritte nella cintola le si pongha in su '[i]l cho[r]po a carno ignuda'.[49] Margherita was encouraged to reap the benefits of the child's fecundity while also harnessing the power of the Word of God. Placed upon the woman's flesh, the inscribed sacred words would work with the recited prayers to exert their potency. Despite this attribution of power to words, it was only through the mediation of their husbands' correspondence that Margherita and Francesca communicated the trials and tribulations of their lives, including these very private matters. While Margherita was semiliterate at the time of this episode, her sister allegedly lacked any reading comprehension.[50]

Interspersed throughout these letters the men interjected their own opinions about their wives' discussions. Regarding this remedy Francesca's husband wrote: 'Io Niccholo credo che le fareb[b]e più utile e più bene a quello [h]a che'[e]lla la vole adoperare che'[e]lla desse ma[n]ggiare a 3 poveri 3

48 Crabb A., "'If I could write': Margherita Datini and Letter Writing, 1385–1410", *Renaissance Quarterly* 60, 4 (2007) 1170–1206, 1171.

49 Many thanks to Alessia Meneghin for help with the transcription of this letter. 'Say first three Our Fathers and Hail Marys in honour of God and the Holy Trinity and St Catherine; and the letters written on the belt are to be placed on the belly, on the naked flesh […]': Archivio di Stato di Prato (ASP), busta 1103, inserto 14, codice 134071, Carteggio privato, Lettere di vari a Datini, 1103.14, Lettere di Tecchini Niccolò dell'Ammannato a Datini Francesco di Marco, 23 April 1395, Fondo Datini Online (see bibliography for permanent link); English translation: Origo I., *Merchant of Prato: Francesco di Marco Datini* (Harmondsworth: 1979) 161.

50 Margherita's literacy was limited in the late 1380s, but both her reading and writing skills improved over the course of the 1390s and in the early fifteenth century. Francesca's husband indicated that his wife did not know how to write: Crabb, "If I could write'" 1175 and 1188.

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venerdì e non andare dietro a parole che dichono le fem[m]ine'.[51] The men explain that they believe the women's theories to be folly, yet their underlying disapproval of this popular devotional practice perhaps reveals more about the relationship between contemporary belief and medical systems. Seeking the aid of the Virgin and saints or performing pious acts would draw positive attention to the woman and reflect well upon her family, especially her husband. While some have argued that this masculine criticism reflects the divide between 'feminine' popular devotion and the more masculine scholastic Church message regarding the efficacy of good works, does this gendered discussion allow another more nuanced reading?[52] These women, whose literacy was limited, seem to attribute a greater efficacy to words, which they may not have fully understood, seeing in them an inherent power that was enhanced and extracted when accompanied by ritual, prayer, and contact with the flesh. Conversely, the men who can read the words inscribed on the belt view them as less mysterious, and therefore less potent, and consign them to the realm of superstitious 'women's chatter'.

Despite the belittling of birthing girdles that is evident in the Datini example, men also advocated their use. In a Veronese miscellany that resembles *libri di famiglie* and *zibaldoni*, Bartolomeo dal Bovo included instructions for a similar apparatus. Embellished with a large manicule signalling its importance, Bartolomeo dal Bovo offers instructions for a belt inscribed with holy words to aid pregnant women. Specifically the leather belt should bear the inscription from Psalm 1 verse 3, which promotes that this holy person: 'shall be as a tree which is planted beside a water course, which will bring forth its fruit in due season, and its leaf shall not fall, and all that it does shall prosper'.[53] The natural imagery of the Psalm, while not overtly Christian, infers that the upright woman represented by the tree, who draws up the water of her faith through her roots, will give birth successfully to a child who will lead a full life. Like the knowledge Bartolomeo dal Bovo preserves in his family book for posterity, girdles of this type may have been passed down from generation to generation.

51 'But I, Niccolò, think it would be better, in order to obtain what she wished, if [Margherita] fed three beggars on three Fridays, and did not hearken to women's chatter': ASP, Datini CP 1103.14 23 April 1395, English translation: Origo, *Merchant of Prato* 161.

52 Park K. "Medicine and Magic: The Healing Arts", in Brown J. – Davis R. (eds.), *Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy* (London: 1998) 129–149, 130.

53 While the text was written mainly by Bartolomeo dal Bovo, other family members also contributed to this miscellany: Bartolomeo Dal Bovo, Libro di famiglia, Verona, Bib. Civ., ms. 827, fol. 35v; English translation: Grubb J.S., *Provincial Families of the Renaissance: Private and Public Life in the Veneto* (Baltimore: 1996) 36. See also Perantoni P., "Writing a Life: The 'family book' by Bartolomeo Dal Bovo", in Rogge, J. (ed.), *Making Sense as a Cultural Practice: Historical Perspectives* (Bielefeld: 2013) 65–73.

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FIGURE 10.8 "La sacra cintola". Green wool with gold embroidery and two cords as ties. 87 cm (length) in the "Reliquary of the Sacra Cintola della Madonna" (Milan, 1638). Gold, enamel, and rock crystal. Cathedral of Santo Stefano, Chapel of the Sacra Cintola.
© FOTOTECA UFFICIO BENI CULTURALI DIOCESI DI PRATO

These girdles probably also reminded users of the Virgin's Girdle (*la Sacra Cintola*), a relic preserved near the Datini home in the cathedral church of Santo Stefano in Prato; the added benefits of holy words possibly replaced the efficacy of direct association with the Virgin offered by the relic [Fig. 10.8]. Many expectant parents relied solely upon the intercession of the Virgin Mary, since: 'blessed is the fruit of her womb'. In his translation of the early forth – or fifth-century text, the *De transitu Beatae Mariae Virginis*, Giuliano di Francesco Guizzelmi recounts the story of the Virgin bestowing her girdle upon Saint Thomas at the moment of her Assumption. Guizzelmi explains that the girdle, now preserved in the church of Santo Stefano, had been made by the Virgin: 'with her own hands and which certainly encircled her body and, for nine months, the blessed Jesus when he was in her womb and which she and the blessed Jesus often touched and with which the most holy apostles girt her body when they placed her Majesty in the tomb'.[54]

Devotion to this Church-approved relic was promoted as an acceptable focus for intercession related to pregnancy and motherhood. Since its arrival in Prato in the middle of the twelfth century, it has been displayed to the public on special feast days.[55] A miracle story associated with the Virgin's girdle recounts how the wife of the Marchese of Monferrato, whose baby was presenting as transverse, gave birth successfully as a result of her veneration of

54 Guizzelmi Giuliano di Francesco, *Historia della Cinctola della Vergine Maria*, ed. C. Grassi (Prato: 1990) 163–164 cited in Maniura R., "Persuading the Absent Saint: Image and Performance in Marian Devotion", *Critical Inquiry* 35, 3 (2009) 629–654, 640.

55 Musacchio J.M., *Art, Marriage, & Family in the Florentine Renaissance Palace* (New Haven: 2008) 192. On the history of the Sacra Cintola, also see Grassi C., "La storia del Sacro Cignolo", in Capobianco A. (ed.), *La Sacra Cintola nel Duomo di Prato* (Prato: 1995) 23–39; Mavarelli C.G., "La Sacra Cintola", in *Il Museo di Palazzo Pretorio a Prato* (Florence – Milan: 2015) 103.

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the relic. The Marchesa of Monferrato also wore a replica of the Virgin's girdle; this girdle had absorbed the power of the relic after a Carmelite friar, Giovanni Manzi of Prato, touched it to the Virgin's Girdle in Prato.[56] Both her devotion and the contact relic worked together to facilitate her labour. A birthing girdle listed in the inventory of Franciescho Inghirrami might connote a similar object: '1º nastro di seta bianco chon orelique apicchiato da porre a dosso a donna di parto', the relics attached to this white silk ribbon may have gained their power from an association with the Virgin's *Sacra Cintola* or a saint associated with childbirth, such as Margaret.[57]

An extension of courtship gifts exchanged during the middle ages, girdles (also called belts, or *cinture* in Italian) remained common as love tokens and wedding gifts throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.[58] Referencing the famous embroidered girdle of Venus, which bestowed powers of seduction upon its wearer, these girdles were also valued for their ability to attract suitors and to encourage fertility as evidenced by the advice offered to Margherita Datini.[59] While relatively few survive, a luxurious fifteenth-century girdle with enamelled metal buckles embellished with *nielloed* medallions is an elite example [Fig. 10.9].[60] On one semi-circular medallion an inscription invokes the Grace of God: 'Spera in Dio'. These words may have served as a prompt to devotional activity and could have offered the wearer God's protection. Girdles given during betrothal and marriage may have been repurposed for use during pregnancy; new girdles might also be given as gifts to expectant mothers, who often wore leather girdles close to their skin.[61] The Italian words for belt

56 Guizzelmi, *Historia della Cinctola* cited in Maniura, "Persuading the Absent Saint" 644–645.

57 It was listed along with a '1a anpollina di relique (ampula of relics)' and other objects that were stored in a 'schatolino dipinto (painted box)': Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Magistrato dei Pupilli Avanti il Principato, 173, 266 v cited in Musacchio, *Art, Marriage, & Family* 173, note 228.

58 On belts as symbols of courtship, see Krohn D., "55. Belt or Girdle with a Woven Love Poem", in Bayer A. (ed.), Art and Love in Renaissance Italy, exh. cat., The Metropolitan Museum of Art (New Haven – London: 2008) 128–129; Musacchio J.M., "36a. Girdle & 36b. Girdle End with a Profile Couple (front) and a Woman Holding a Pink (back)", in Bayer A. (ed.), Art and Love in Renaissance Italy, exh. cat., The Metropolitan Museum of Art (New Haven – London: 2008) 105–107; Musacchio, *Art, Marriage, & Family* 168–174; Syson L. – Thornton D., *Objects of Virtue: Art in Renaissance Italy* (Los Angeles: 2001), 55–56; Venturelli P., *Gioielli e gioiellieri milanesi: storia, arte moda* (1450–1630) (Milan: 1996) 183–190.

59 Musacchio, *Art, Marriage, & Family* 171–172.

60 Matthews-Grieco S.F., "Marriage and Sexuality", in Ajmar M. – Dennis F. (eds.), *At Home in Renaissance Italy*, exh. cat., The Victoria & Albert Museum (New Haven – London: 2006) 104–119, 108–109.

61 Gilbertson L., "The Vanni Altarpiece and the Relic Cult of Saint Margaret: Considering a Female Audience", in Lamia S. – Valdez del Álamo E. (eds.), *Decorations for the Holy Dead:*

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FIGURE 10.9 Girdle, ca. 1450. Tablet woven lampas with gilded and enamelled metal, nielloed silver, and stamped brass. Victoria & Albert Museum, 4278–1857. Detail of the inscriptions on the two niello roundels, which read 'AMORE. VOL' and 'SPERA. IN DIO'.
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(*cintura*) and pregnancy (*incinta*) shared etymological roots, further reinforcing the associations between these objects and pregnancy.[62] Therefore, as a common clothing item associated with the advent of married life and adulthood, the Virgin's Girdle served as a recognisable and relatable relic to all who believed in its efficacy.

3 Motherhood

Many of the pregnancy aids described above also contained notes for the protection of the home, thus extending their power to all members of the family. Once she had given birth, the mother's attention turned to her child's welfare. Among a host of objects used to protect children were those that were both textual and religious in nature.[63] For example, wealthy children were often clothed in veils embroidered with words such as the Name of Jesus in gold thread during their baptisms.[64] Prayers might be written upon objects the children used. The *Oratione devota di Sancto Cypriano contro alli spiriti maligni, & buona a tenere nella culla delli fanciulli piccoli contro alle fantasme & contro*

Visual Embellishments on Tombs and Shrines of Saints (Turnhout: 2002) 179–190 at 180 and Krohn, "55. Belt or Girdle" 128.

62 Gilbertson, "The Vanni Altarpiece and the Relic Cult" 189 note 21.

63 See also Maya Corry's essay in this volume, 310–341.

64 Musacchio, *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth* 49.

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a tucte le malie not only advises the wearing of the prayer, but also that the booklet itself be placed in children's cradles to protect them from spirits and other evil things.[65]

Children, too, might be given *brevi* to wear. Musacchio has noted that Florentine inventories list childhood *brevi* along with other types of charms, such as the embroidered *breve* pouch that accompanies the coral and tooth worn by the Christ Child in a painting by Lo Scheggia [Fig. 10.10].[66] Families who could afford the services of a wet-nurse sent practical and apotropaic objects along with their new-born child – from linens to charms, which often included bits of coral, *agnus dei*,[67] and brevi, offering them an otherworldly protection as their own parents relinquished control of them for a time.[68] In his account book Antonio Rustichi recorded the items that accompanied his fifteen children to their wet-nurse, such as swaddling cloths, linens, and cribs.[69] The Rustichi children were also sent with the family's set of amulets, comprising: 'una brancha di chorallo chon una ghera d'ariento, uno dente chon deta brancha, uno brieve di scamito nero cho' l'arme chon detta'.[70] The '*breve*' itself was a pouch made from black samite decorated with the Rustichi arms, thus linking the contents' protective qualities to the security of the family name.

65 Many thanks to Marco Faini for finding and sharing the transcription of this prayer. (Florence, Francesco di Giovanni Benvenuto: non *ante* 1516). Rome, Biblioteca dell'Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei e Corsiniana.

66 While Musacchio suggests that the object is covered with text, a close examination of a high-resolution image reveals instead that it is a piece of fabric, probably a *breve* pouch, embellished with pearls and embroidery. This type of *Madonna and Child* painting, in the shape known as a *colmo*, was a popular format for images of domestic devotion and perhaps the amulets depicted by lo Scheggia offered further protection to the family who owned the painting: Olson R., "Lost and Partially Found: The Tondo, a Significant Florentine Art Form, in Documents of the Renaissance", *Artibus et Historiae* 14 (1993) 31–65, 35. See also Musacchio J.M., "Lambs, Coral, Teeth, and the Intimate Intersection of Religion and Magic in Renaissance Tuscany", in Cornelison S.J. – Montgomery S.B. (eds.), *Images, Relics and Devotional Practices in Medieval and Renaissance Italy*, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 296 (Tempe, AZ: 2006) 139–156, 154–155.

67 For information about the devotional and protective uses of the *agnus dei* see the essay by Irene Galandra Cooper in this volume, 220–243.

68 Musacchio, *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth* 142–143.

69 Musacchio, *Art, Marriage, & Family* 202.

70 'A branch of coral with a silver ring, a tooth with that branch, a *breve* of black samite with the arms of the family'. According to Musacchio, the records explain that coral and tooth had to be replaced many times. This allows us to infer that presumably the same *breve* was used by all these children. Another *breve* was included in this list and was described as: 'uno brieve di domaschino azurro [a blue damask *breve*]': Musacchio, *Art, Marriage, & Family* 202 & note 54 cites the Carte Strozziane 11,11, 11r; See also Musacchio, *The Art & Ritual of Childbirth* Appendix D.

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FIGURE 10.10 Giovanni di Ser Giovanni (lo Scheggia), "Madonna and Child with Angels", ca. 1450–1480. Tempera on panel. Private Collection [Last Known: Collection H. Kisters, Kreuzlingen, Switzerland]

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Mothers constantly worried for the well-being of their children, and these anxieties continued long after their children outgrew the cradle. Prayers worn throughout childhood might become permanent fixtures throughout a person's life. In January 1554, Giulia Orsini Silva in Ferrara wrote a letter to her son Giuseppe in besieged Siena filled with motherly concern for his spiritual, physical and moral well-being. After ordering Giuseppe to not mix with 'bad company' and to avoid the temptation of gambling, she entreats him: 'Che tu mi facessi questa gratia di portare quelle sancte oratione che io ti missi al collo con bona devotione'.[71] Giulia believes so strongly in the necessity of these 'sancte oratione' that she continues: 'et se quelle fussero andate in sinistro damene aviso che subito te ne manderò un'altra'.[72] Giulia's offer to replace the 'sancte oratione' if they have been compromised suggests that she is worried that these prayers which were probably worn as a *breve* may have been unsealed, thus cancelling their efficacy, or lost. If caught with these objects and questioned by Inquisitors, men often blamed their mothers, who had insisted that they wear them from a young age and instilled in them a belief in their efficacy.[73] The implications of this are twofold: first, that mothers were viewed as pious and their devotional guidance as trustworthy; second, that it was credible that those most apt to encourage the use of such wearable texts were women, and therefore men accused of such practices might be excused if they were following the advice of their mothers. While this chapter has focused upon women's reliance upon the apotropaic, prophylactic and thaumaturgic text, reflecting links between these objects and feminine belief systems, men also relied upon them as the cases of Bartolomeo del Bovo and Giovanni Silva illustrate. Even if men did not always admit their faith in these objects to authorities, they still used them in their daily lives.

At a time when they had little say over who they married, infertility signalled failure, pregnancy was often fatal, and the infant mortality rate soared, women struggled to navigate the perils of their very existence. Some relied

71 'That you could do me this favour to wear the holy prayers that I placed around your neck with great devotion': 25 January 1554, *Giulia Orsini Silva to Giovanni Silva*, Archivio Mediceo del Principato, Vol. 1862, fol. 161. Doc ID: 21008.

72 'And if these have been compromised, send me word and I will quickly send you another': Ibid.

73 Skemer discusses a Morisco man brought before the Spanish Inquisition in 1620 who claimed his mother gave him an Arabic amulet against the evil eye and that he did not understand it since he was illiterate: Skemer, *Binding Words* 144; For another Italian example in which the man attributes the suspect object to his mother, see Irene Galandra Cooper's essay in this volume, 221.

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solely upon religious intercession, others followed the latest medical advice, some believed in the power of 'magical' remedies, and others resorted to some combination of all these in order to face life's potential hazards. Though studies have shed light on the popularity and wide use of the application of holy words to women's bodies during moments of pregnancy and motherhood, particularly in medieval and early modern England and France, little attention has been given to the ubiquity of these practices in early modern Italy.[74] The use of holy words and phrases in the form of girdles, legends of Saint Margaret, prayer sheets and amulets offered women the comfort of spiritual protection in braving their chaotic world.

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74 European: Skemer, *Binding Words*; English; Morse M., "'Thys moche more ys oure Lady Mary longe': Takamiya MS 56 and the English birth girdle tradition", in Horobin S. – Mooney L. (eds.), *Middle English Texts in Transition: A Festschrift Dedicated to Toshiyuki Takamiya on his 70th Birthday* (Woodbridge: 2014) 199–219 and Volf, *A "Medicyne of Wordes"*; French: Aymar A., "Contribution à l'étude du folklore de la Haute-Auvergne. Le sachet accoucheur et ses mystères", *Annales du Midi: revue archéologique, historique et philologique de France méridionale*, 38, 149–150 (1926) 273–347; and Carolus-Barré L., "Un nouveau parchemin amulette".

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